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Managing and Leading Technical Teams in IT Projects: Knowing Your Flock!

Part 1 of a series

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Throughout the years of managing IT projects, one thing that stood out of my many indelible memories was the challenge to put up a technical team of many flavors. It would be great if it was just plain vanilla, but that won't usually happen in an IT project especially one that demands a product, solution or service to be running on an integrated platform. The technical teams I'm referring here are Software Developers.

I have the delightful privilege to work with the finest technical minds, whose creativities and foresights had saved the day. And of course, at the other end of the scale, there were other technical teams I have engaged with whose pattern of behaviors and actions were diametrically opposite. Since no two snow flakes are alike, it is therefore wise to tweak our leadership and management style to suite different team personalities.

Although I am not suggesting any special treatment, technical team with their various make up is, nonetheless, a concern to Project Managers who must find ways to manage and lead them as a total workforce, not as a separate entity.

What is Unique About Them?

Technical minds are "think-intensive" people. Their minds are occupied by a smorgasbord of possibilities and alternatives. Their journey of unbridled creativity starts in the labyrinth of their minds. They reach a state of euphoria when their endeavors are able to crack gridlocks to discover breakthroughs.

With so much requirements to digest and solutions to produce, technical people need more latitude along the corridor of their thoughts. They need more rooms to wander deeper into the realm of creativity. This is part of their quest of tapping a flick of inspiration for that hour of need.

Like a self-inspired artist seeking breakthrough through his expression, technical people share the same sphere of inspiration to find their own expressions to showcase their craftsmanship. They also canvass ideas and tips, and often thrive in a seemingly disconnected environment less understood by others.

Consequently, they seem to stand in contrast with others, and how often they are misunderstood as aloof, unsociable and self-reflective breed.

Now one could ask, “*Why should a need to understand a technical development team important?*” Are they not any different than other stakeholders in the project? True, they are no different than you and me except that their behavior, pattern of thoughts, and predisposition are something that Project Managers must try to recognize and understand. By understanding them, Project Managers are able to engage with them more effectively - managing the complexity of their world, giving them priority where needed, rewarding them where needed, building a synergistic relationship between them and the rest of the project team. Here are some examples of their characteristics that Project Managers may find interesting enough to pay attention.

1. They can be **brief and abrupt in their response**. Technical people are transparent and go straight to the point. Why is this uniqueness important to Project Managers? Because technical team needs to be tactful in their discussions, engagements and conversations with their customers. Being direct can offend a sensitive user. Project Managers sometimes need to intervene and must try to understand technical predicament or challenges and present them from a perspective that is more acceptable by ordinary folks. Customers prefer problems and solutions to be palpably presented in terms of cost, schedule, resource or functional scope.
2. They think **in parts rather than whole**. Because their works are apportioned, each is assigned to only a partial of the total list of programs. For that reason, they manage their works within limited range hence operate from a knot-hole instead of a panoramic standpoint. Why is this uniqueness a concern to Project Managers? Project Managers need to be aware of their limitations and treat each like a small jigsaw to a bigger puzzle. Dealing with each one of them is like finding a clue in a treasure hunt game!
3. They are **analytical** and even a small problem can plunge them into deep thoughts. Naturally, this is one of their inherited characteristics. Technical people are better in producing practical solutions than just being rhetorical about theories and hypothesis. They are people of few words and in general more realistic about things. Why is this important to Project Managers? Project Managers need to listen to their opinions because most of the time they are just telling what is feasible, not superfluous. This is important to get a realistic planning and deliverables during project scheduling, risk management and change control.

4. They can rise quickly to a state of **self-gratification and how good they feel** are reflected on the success of their products. It's a "utopia" state of feeling when their solutions are implemented successful and their customers are happy using them. Why should Project Managers need to know this? Project Managers need to understand that sometimes the greatest reward for a technical team is public recognition. Their private efforts must be rewarded openly. For instant, finding ways to give them credit and accolades during product launching event gives them the needed recognition. Also publishing their achievements by names on the company's intranet or newsletter is another good idea to give them internal recognition and promotion.
5. They can be **innovative** and see more than one possibility to solve a problem. Why is this important to Project Managers? Project Managers should harness their technical team creativity to provide cost-effective alternatives or quick workaround solution. Also try not to micromanage a technical team. Project Managers should push the lever up to free them from being choke of micromanagement and liberate creativity power.

However, being innovative could also end up with a setback if it is aimed at cutting corners for the sake of quickly resolving problems.

6. They have **appetite for new things** especially those that will spur them to be great **technology exploits**. Why is this important to Project Managers? Project Managers should use the latest technology that will give short and long term returns. It is also a retention strategy as technical people prefer to experiment and try out new-fangled software or tools. *"It's the new toy that keeps the child awake and engrossed"*
7. They tend to **attribute mistakes to others first** before realizing it is theirs. Why is this important to Project Managers? Technical people take pride in their work and almost always attribute failures or errors to users only to discover that the root cause is actually the design flaw, logic fault or programming bugs. Project Managers must ensure that their technical team tests their programs correctly with the Application Specialists and the users themselves. Project Managers must also make sure to capture mistakes as lessons learned and shared them in a common forum. More importantly, they must be careful not to put their fingers on any individuals in full view of others even if the source of the mistake is identified – Save a face to save the day.
8. Similarly to 6, they tend to get **bored over stereotype role**. Development work can be laborious and mentally challenging. It is easy to douse their flames of passion when they have been using old technology or rudimentary tools over a period of time. Why is this important to Project

Managers? Project Managers must look for ways to excite and open learning opportunities for their technical team to explore and be on the cutting edge of the technology. Technical people do not want to be left behind in an ever rapid technological change lest they become less marketable. This augurs well with this saying *“Why play by the seashore when there is a great ocean out there”*

9. Their **importance fade quicker than the rest into the project horizon**. Because their efforts are “backstage” activities, with less or no spotlight on them, technical people can dwindle away as “forgotten heroes”. In any typical IT project, they provide a quiet backdrop for frontline implementers. Why is this important to Project Managers? Project Managers must not leave them out of sight. They should be followed up and checked using milestone schedule.
10. They are **code-driven people** rather than application-driven. Naturally, they are less attentive to functional needs as they are more slanted on making their codes work. Why is this important to Project Managers? Technical team must get their understanding from the best of both worlds – technical and application. They must stay away from developing solutions that are quick to get results but do not take into consideration of long term needs. True solutions are functional and technical compliant to business and user needs both short and long term.
11. They get **comfortable in the same lingo**. They build their ethos in a language world of technical jargons, oxymoron, and buzzwords. They are clustered by themselves because of the nature of their work. Why is this also important to Project Managers? Project Managers need to break them away from being a “world of their own” group. Every effort must be made to assimilate them to be part of the project family. Project Managers need to smash down the wall that stands between the technical world and the rest in a project and foster a flow of inter-pollination.

Why Project Managers must not neglect their Technical Teams?

Everyone loves attention. And why not? In a project, people get it either because they play an influential role or have something that contributes to the final objective. In the case of technical teams, they play such a seminal role in every phase of the project. They take the concepts in our head and sculpt them into a reality solution. If that is not enough, they vindicate, support and reinforce the momentum of the frontend project team, bringing theories and models to life. The following reasons reveal more of their importance:-

1. They appear to be a **detached group**, band together and tucked away with activities that are mostly hidden behind the project veil. A Project Manager must be conscious of a continuous need to close any gaps that exist between the development team and those engage in the forefront activities. Leaving such gap could come with a high price, if it leads to “missing” links between design and development, concept and reality or requirement and solution.
2. They **do not embody the total solution group** - they are responsible for creating the finishing product. Technical people are just a jigsaw to the total solution group as the rest are made up of a combination of specialists; Application Specialists, Business Process Owners, Solution Architect, Legal Advisor, System Integrators, Hardware Vendors, etc. Therefore, Project Managers cannot afford to neglect them because they are a vital organ to the functioning of the overall project body.
3. Their design lacked **long term solution** as they do not approach the product design in a holistic manner or in terms of enduring usefulness. Development team can be myopic in their solutions as they are locally focus, have inclination to finish the job quickly and bent on taking the least painstaking route instead of “rewiring” the whole logic of the programming codes. Project Managers cannot take them for granted as their input need to be integrated into the whole solution.
4. Their have higher tendency than the rest to **resist new requirements** and change requirements. They understand even what appears to be small changes or adjustments could mean “reconstructing” a range of programs. It is not unusual for technical developers to attempt to cut down as much “unnecessary” effort as possible. A compromise on quality is possible. Therefore, Project Managers cannot afford to neglect them because a breakthrough solution is enshrined in their creative minds.
5. They have higher tendency of **getting burn out** than others. Developers are “thinking intensive” workforce. “Distance” away, they spent more laborious development time in solitude. The effort they put together to produce a total solution demands rapt concentration, long and extensive hours. Project Managers must ensure they don't get disconnected from the rest and also not overwhelmed by workload until it jeopardizes the schedule, cost and priority.
6. They are **critical resources during development stage**. The second half of the project lies very much in their hands - from development to final delivery phase. Make or break will be solely dependent on them once the baton is passed over from the application/design team.

While it is dangerous to leave a team in an auto-pilot mode, Project Managers together with their Team Managers need to sustain a prevailing mood that would take their teams through the high seas and troughs during the project lifecycle.

7. They are authors of system programs. They know how to find their ways in the subterranean of every complex and meandering path of their codes. We hail them as **crucial authors of technical blue prints** as they alone know how to make sense of the underlying logics behind the business processes and know how every cog that makes a program(s) work. Therefore, if we neglect them, we'll miss some important revelation of the product.

Tendencies Syndrome

Technical individuals ride on a rather mechanical title. Their stereotype roles provide them the anvil upon which shapes them to become who they are. This as a result has caused them to have certain tendencies. Understand these distinctiveness of them enables Project Managers to relate, manage and align them to the overall project team from a thoughtful and synergistic standpoint. Project Managers can either leverage their tendencies or counter them, whichever that would benefit the overall project.

From my years of working with them in projects, these are their tendencies I have observed:-

- # 1 They are more disperse than collective. They tend to look at different parts than the sum of all.
- # 2 They can be more negative than positive in accepting opinions or suggestions in particularly relating to change. Because they understand the underlying complexities of programming, they can quickly spring up to defense at the suggestion for change. The thought of elaborate customization is mentally tiring.
- # 3 They tend to become more reactive than proactive. Although most developers are quite creative, they could prefer to take the stance of being "passive" and just comply with instructions. Being suggestive or proactive could simply mean digging deeper into more requirements thus leading to more work.
- # 4 They are more occupied than others. Technical development usually demands intensified thinking. They are usually engrossed in the cyclic process of coding and testing.

- # 5 They tend to be less conventional. They are forced to think out of the box because technical changes and development sometimes require innovative approach to reach solutions.
- # 6 They get more personal satisfaction than team satisfaction. Technical individuals get inner satisfaction when their development efforts are turned into real application. Individually, it gives them great thrill to see their application functioning, in use and producing the right results.
- # 7 They can't sustain long in the same role. They have tendency to get fed up for not able to come off from the thread mill. They like experimenting and are great technology exploiters if given the right opportunity.
- # 8 They tend to get less recognition more than the rest as their efforts and appearances are usually hidden "behind the veil".
- # 9 They bent towards the left-brain. They have tendency to be too analytical and over focus on issues without understanding the fuller picture.
- # 10 They tend to be concise and terse. They lack the fluency in written skill hence bereft of good documentation. They 'dwell' in the world of jargons, pseudo codes and short instructions. The prolong period of over-indulging in technical activities can stunt their growth in other soft skill and corporate management ability.
- # 11 They have tendency to think linear. This makes them less compatible and lacks the strategic thinking mind which is so relished in a corporate environment like management group.

Now that we know them a little better, the next time we shall find out how they fit with the rest in a project...or can they?

"Do not shut out a technical mind, it may just come back and bite off a chunk of your client's satisfaction !"

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